

# Joke Lanz is spinning the records – Analysis and graphical representation of an improvised concert of Experimental Turntablism

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## Abstract

Homemade and reused devices in experimental music are the result of compositional ideas and processes. In this contribution, I want to show that the record player as an instrument in live performances provides manifold possibilities to create signal/noise relationships. The analysis of sound artist Joke Lanz's improvised concert reveals individual sonic concepts that liaise signal and noise, playback and live manipulated sounds. These concepts are realised by manipulations and prepared turntables or vinyl discs. The turntable, uniting mechanic and electronic processes, creates unique affordances and material properties that link sound and physical gesture. The resulting sounds of Lanz's turntable performances are media-specific. My analysis will show this by focusing on the interaction of the performer with the instrument. The analytical methodology includes ideas of materiality and mediality of performances. As a new tool for an analysis, the software EAnalysis was used to incorporate the video recording next to graphical representations of the sounds.

## The Record Player as an Instrument

The record player provides unique material properties and affordances. [1] It plays prerecorded sound from a spiral groove of a vinyl record with a tone needle that transforms its vibrations into electronic signals. Using this playback medium as an instrument in improvised concerts means that distinct material properties and mechanical processes of the plastic disc and the turntable shape the musical result that cannot be realized with another medium or instrument. The record player's material properties provide the resistance of a physical body. The mechanical part of the turntable facilitates the transformation of physical gestures into the electronic sounds. This link between electronic sounds and physical gestures, this 'techno-somatic dimension', as Garth Paine explains, is crucial for embodiment and expressive playing. [2] "The 'how the instrument feels' consideration is part of a critical feedback loop between action and instrument response," as Paine underlines. [3] In comparison to digital electronic instruments, this link between physical body and sound is not only imitated and 'second-rate', as John Croft would argue. [4] He highlights the importance of the "appearance of human fallibility and corporeality", which he terms as 'grain' in reference to Roland Barthes. [5] Therefore, the turntable provides special affordances as a hybrid of mechanical

and electronic device that allows unique ways of embodiment of electronic sounds.

In experimental turntablism, it is common that sound artists prepare, assemble and create their vinyl discs and record players individually (see, e.g., Christian Marclay, Martin Tétreault, Thomas Brinkmann or Janek Schaefer). The customised design and use of the turntables in concert evolves by experimentation and performance. John Richards considers the electronic instruments of the DIY movement as a documentation of the artist's practice and sound research. [6] The roles of composer, performer, instrument creator and researcher are conflated. The concerts are usually improvised and unrepeatable, which adds a specific eventness. As Erika Fischer-Lichte describes performances, the artists pick up on affordances from the venue or the audience's behaviour, which creates a feedback loop. [7] As a result of these conditions in experimental turntablism, significant dependencies of the performance on the record players as live instruments emerge. I want to demonstrate this by presenting the results of an analysis of Joke Lanz's turntable performance. In experimental turntablism, individual approaches show a broad range of the creative use of turntables and of the interaction with the instruments. In Lanz's concert, his distinct sonic concepts and playing techniques create signal/noise relationships and rhythmical elements. His direct way of performing with the turntables using many manual manipulations ensures tactile music making. As a result of the turntable's peculiar way of linking sound and physical body, the sound production is mostly visualised in the concert. Unless we perceive these media-specific aspects in the live performance, significant medial and sensual meanings will be lost. These idiosyncratic aspects bring technological mediation into the foreground of perception and facilitate reflections on the medium and the here and now. These premises guided my methodology and analytical steps.

## Methodology & Graphical Representation

My methodology places the focus on the synergies between instrument building, the physical sound and performative aspects concerning materiality (embodiment) and mediality (presence). Video recordings from two cameras (1 master and 1 close-up shot) and visual

representations in the software EAnalysis (developed by Pierre Couprie) as well as notes of concert observations support the analyst's memory for the analysis. It must be considered that the video recording of the concert does not match the performance situation. The camera image frames an event, highlights its importance and shows close-ups that create an enhanced sight and are not comparable with the spectator's perception. Therefore an evaluative selection is implied and several aspects such as the atmosphere or reactions of the audience cannot be conveyed. However, the recording was guided by the analytical framework and research questions of my thesis, which require the focus on the interaction of performer and instrument. For this reason the video was limited to the events on the stage. The software EAnalysis provides several representations (spectrogram, waveform, graphical representation) as different layers that can be screened interactively with the video (not only with the audio). The graphical representation shows iconic forms inspired by the shapes in the spectrogram. According to Pierre Couprie, the iconic representation with more intuitive links between graphical object and sound is easier to read than a symbolic representation (such as symbols of notational systems). [8] Michael Clarke criticises the non-standardised forms in graphical scores as well as the limitations in representing more complex sounds. [9] However, several experiments show, as Lindsay Vickery highlights, that the mapping of graphical representations and sounds seems to have natural limitations due to 'weak synaesthesia' or cross-modal activation. [10]

## Analysis

### Artist

Joke Lanz (born 1965, Basel) is a Swiss sound artist who has lived in Berlin for many years. He has been performing with the turntables since the 1990s. At the same time, he performs under the name Sudden Infant, which is a solo noise project. His main influences are punk and industrial music, Dada and Viennese Actionism. This comes across in very energetic and intuitive improvisations with electronics. He understands vinyl records as something organic almost alive and appreciates the physical properties of the discs, that can be heard in the crackling of the surface, for example.

### Instrument

Lanz's setup and technological devices are aligned to guarantee a direct and immediate playing. He plays with two turntables in a rotated position what hip hop turntablists would call 'the battle position'. In this position, the tone arm is in front of the player instead of the player's right side. This means that the platter is more approachable for manipulations. The crossfader facilitates to create a mix of two channels (crossfader in the middle position) or to blend into one of the two channels by moving the fader sideways from the middle

position. The crossfader's low resistance allows quick shoves with only one finger, and in Lanz's case also abrupt breaks. Lanz used additionally a sampling device for this concert. His numerous vinyl records are only partly prepared (see Figure 4).

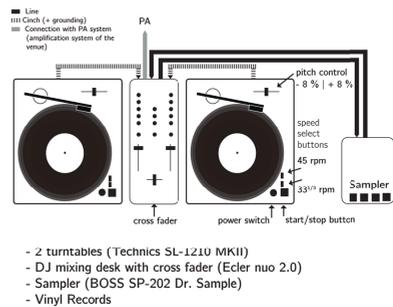


Fig 1. Joke Lanz's setup in the performance on 19th December 2014 in Berlin, © Karin Weissenbrunner.

### Sound material

The concert by Joke Lanz took place on 19th December 2014 in West Germany – a small, underground venue in Berlin (Germany) – and was around 26 minutes long. The performance encompasses heterogenous sound material from the sampler and 19 vinyl discs, including varieties of noises, spoken word and music samples. Yet only a few spoken word samples, mainly numbers, are recognisable. The signal-based and more quiet sounds are often shortened so that only phonemes and sound fragments remain. The signal-based samples feature, for example, electronic drop sounds, female vocal sounds, a child singing 'Over the Rainbow' or glissandi of sine tones. Most of them seem related to speech and consist of pure sounds with few harmonics. The noise-based sounds feature harsh noise, feedback, broad-band noise bursts or digital noise impulses.

### Structure

The concert has a collage-like form featuring typical characteristics such as the use of prerecorded sound material and obvious cuts. [11] Yet contrasts as well as musical developments sculpt rhythmic patterns, sound carpets and transitions. Eleven smaller entities create a structure that mainly opposes alternating parts of powerful noises and smaller, signal-based sounds. Various forms of manipulated sounds (such as scratching sounds) seem to liaise between these two poles. The prerecorded sound material is throughout in a rhythmic context with other sound material, fragments of both turntables interact in rhythmic dialogues. Pairing short sound snippets as one main voice from the turntable with short cut-outs or scratches from the other turntable or sampling device results in durational patterns and complex syncopations. These rhythmic textures get

recorded and looped on the sample device to build up a background that new sound material can be projected against. In the same way, Lanz creates transitions from one part to another. Short fragments of the opposing sound material are added rhythmically to the texture of the constructed sound carpet. Also the noise-based passages appear mostly controlled because of the loop structure of the noise samples or the timed breaks in between. However, Lanz breaks with this strategy of contrasting parts in the last three minutes of the concert. He plays several music citations for longer periods, which create a background of beats and add a new dynamic. While the main part of the concert had a more controlled characteristic, Lanz seems to open the performance up for more chaotic and random sound samples. Also the different manipulations change more often. This gives an impression of a climax, which he finalises with loud noise bursts in a staccato. These noises flow into a constant deep noise that slowly runs out into nothing.

### Embodiment – Human Actions

The most frequently occurring actions are Lanz's controls of the turning records and the faders on the mixing desk to interrupt the playback from the turntables. He also carefully moves the record manually under the needle to create a short fragment of sound. These 'interruptions' are similar to Pierre Schaeffer's first experiments with the Cut Bell fragment. [12] Cutting the samples into short fragments prevents their identification. But Lanz varies the lengths of the fragments and the audience will eventually recognise citations. Interrupting the playback seems to be a sonic element to put samples into a musical context or to create comical moments. It is also related to Lanz's ways of timing in his Sudden Infant project. Drew Daniel sees the 'self-interrupting' and 'thought-erasing' as "the secret to Sudden Infant's comic timing." [13] These interrupting manipulations are related to Lanz's various forms of scratching techniques, which are comparable to those of hip hop turntablists (although he does not follow a strict beat). These can be manual scratches moving the record forwards and backwards at a slower or faster pace, spinning the record at a high speed or combining the scratching movements with the cross fader. Lanz uses these manipulations mainly to create transitions between signal-based and noise-based parts. For example, by continuously moving the disc back and forth, he creates a chain of scratches and therefore a noisy element out of a signal-based sample. The noisy scratches result in an almost pure sound element, a vowel of a child's voice, that introduces a signal-based part. This can be followed in the graphical representation (see red curve under the video at 17:40 min in the concert in Figure 2). The scratching sounds are linked with the physical movements of the performer. However, this link is broken when manipulation sounds are the content of a disc (for example at 11:09 – 11:31 min). In this case, the record player's mechanical rotation of the disc for the playback creates a limited form of phonographic

embodiment. These visual cues might help the spectator to resolve any confusion about whether the sounds are produced live or prerecorded.

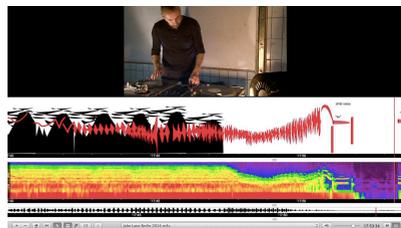


Fig 2. Excerpt at 17:40 min in software EAnalysis: Waveform (bottom layer), spectrogram, graphical representation and video of the concert (top layer). In the graphical representation, turntable on the left = red, turntable on the right = black, sampler = grey, © Karin Weissenbrunner.

Another sonic concept: Lanz manually drops the needle to create broad-band noise bursts or to skip through several tracks of the disc. This has been used for transitions as well. But the most conspicuous gesture of the whole concert is surely when Lanz starts to shake the whole table with both turntables on top to create a form of staccato of needle drops at the end of his concert (see Figure 3). The audience cheers and encourages the performer to continue shaking the turntables. This was not a planned action but a complete spur-of-the-moment idea, according to the performer. Before the concert, only a ramshackle beer table from the venue was left for Lanz's setup. He also did not know the ending of his concert at this time. This demonstrates that improvised turntable concerts are the result of a feedback loop between the performer, the instrument, the audience and the venue. A unique musical performance is brought forth by the process of the event.

### Phonographic Embodiment

For another transition from a signal-based to a noise-based part, Lanz uses a prepared LP with stickers (Figure 4). The bursts from the needle jumping over the stickers develop a similar rhythmic pattern to the figure of a speech-like sample from the other turntable. This prepared disc brings noises of the medium itself to the foreground. The distortion noises are linked with the repeating movements of the jumping needle and therefore an example of phonographic embodiment.

Other phonographic manipulations are speed regulations that create glissandi or transpositions. A very conspicuous phonographic embodiment in this concert is slowing down the rotation of the turntable until it stops. Lanz uses the power knob of the turntable for this manipulation at least seven times during the concert. This function is often used to end a section, most prominently after the first minute or at the end of the concert.



Fig 3. Joke Lanz shaking the table in the performance on 19th December 2014, © Karin Weissenbrunner.



Fig 4. LP with stickers by Joke Lanz. This example is similar to the LP from the performance, © Karin Weissenbrunner.

### Mediality – Presence

The many human actions of Lanz interacting with the instrument (e.g. record changes and manual manipulations) as well as his body language generate a strong presence of the performer, which dominates the instrument's phonographic presence. Lanz's manipulation techniques and spontaneous ideas appear skilful. His playing techniques, such as the long scratching passages, require practice and concentration. The audience members not only understand the sound production but also assess their virtuosic execution. However, Lanz combines this technical performing style with his influences from punk and industrial music and denies a perfectionistic approach.

### Conclusion

As the examples of the concert analysis show, Joke Lanz has developed individual sonic concepts to create signal/noise relationships that are entwined with his playing techniques and specific to the turntable. The concert is significantly shaped by the tension between prerecorded and live manipulated sounds. The mechanical functions of the turntable translate the physical movements of the performer and provide important cues for the audience to understand the

unconventional sound production. The majority of electronic sounds are embodied by the performer's actions. Lanz's gestures show artistic intentions and a form of mastery of playing techniques paired with spontaneity and intensity (e.g. ending the concert by shaking the turntables). This strengthens the performer's presence and authenticity and speaks for Lanz's distinct performing style. The embodied sounds indicate the dependence on the material properties of the turntable. Turntablist and visual artist Christian Marclay describes this as "the contradiction between the material reality of the art object as a thing and its potential immateriality." [14] By manipulating and abusing discarded reproduction technology, such as turntables, the idiosyncrasies of the medium come to the foreground and bring the mediating process of a playback into the listener's awareness. The illusionary dimension of audio recordings, supposed to reproduce a sonic event from another place and time (much like a photograph), is transformed into the reality and processuality of the performance. In Lanz's turntable concert, this results in an abundance of rhythmic elements, interruptions, coherence, contrasting entities of heterogenous sound material as well as moments of spontaneity and physicality, humour and sensuality.

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